

African Literatures in Comparative Perspective

Eileen Julien

[F]or it is not true that mankind's work is done

[A]nd no single people holds the monopoly on beauty, intelligence, and strength
Aimé Césaire

Privilege . . . is one of the great adversaries of the imagination.
Chinua Achebe

With the awarding of the Nobel Prize for Literature to Wole Soyinka of Nigeria in 1986, Naguib Mahfouz of Egypt in 1988, and Nadine Gordimer of South Africa in 1991, the power of the African writer may be said to be truly visible on the world stage at the end of this twentieth century. These and other African writers—Ngugi wa Thiongo of Kenya, Chinua Achebe of Nigeria, Mariama Bâ and Sembène Ousmane of Senegal, Nuruddin Farah of Somalia, Assia Djebar of Algeria, to name some of the most prominent—now have permanent residence, so to speak, on the syllabi of American, Asian, and European universities, in newspapers and bookstores worldwide. We have come a long way, it would seem, from those days in the nineteenth century when European missionaries, administrators, and anthropologists pondered the aesthetic and intellectual potential of African languages and oral traditions.¹

The current volume places African literary practice in comparative perspective. In some sense, there is nothing new in this, for when African literatures have been studied in the West in departments of literature, they have nearly always been studied—it might be argued, *only* studied—comparatively, in their relationship to European literatures. Surely no subscriber to the *Yearbook* needs be convinced of the value of comparative literary study, but we then must ask, What pitfalls attend a uniquely comparative status for African texts?

The Euro-language literatures of Africa began to be taught in the United States in the mid-sixties by individual scholars in departments of English and French, scholars whose curiosity and enthusiasm led them to include a work here and there in their teaching. Today such departments are still the primary sites for the teaching of African literatures,² which may sometimes be granted the luxury of spreading themselves out in courses on “Commonwealth” or “Francophone” literatures. Or, more typically, Africa may provide the odd or last text in introductory courses—I am thinking of the yeoman’s duty performed, for example, by Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* or Camara Laye’s *L’enfant noir*.

In such configurations and disciplinary locations, African texts may be made to lie down peaceably alongside canonical Western texts. The visual image that comes to mind is *Peaceable Kingdom*, the nineteenth century American painting by Edward Hicks, in which lion and lamb, indeed all God’s beasts, compose the earthly family; relationships of power and mutual social constructions play no part. Hicks’s vision of a natural diversity, of distinct essences but more fundamental oneness, thus might serve as the emblem for those who today promote the celebration of a bounteous diversity of human cultures and who champion a multicultural vision of society. Indeed, this is often the motive for inclusion of “Third World” texts. I call it the “gesture of altruism”—inclusion, whether begrudging or enthusiastic, for

the sake of "diversity" or "relevance." It can be no surprise, then, that when African texts are admitted into the family on such bases, one is nearly always bound to ask, What differentiates "the African" from "the European"? What makes this text "authentic"? What is its "distinctive" contribution to world literature?

Given this staging of comparative literary study, African texts have often played an unenviable part, for they can be read only as "the same" or only as "other." In the first instance, they may be seen as the latest instantiation and confirmation of "universal themes," nature, quest, initiation, love, and death. In the second, the qualities that have made many African fictions, for example, useful to social scientists—their imaginative response to anthropological and historical paradigms linked to imperialism and colonialism, their often explicit explorations of contemporary socio-political realities, or their engagement with popular culture and oral traditions—may be seen to be at odds with the aesthetic vocation of Literature. These characteristics may become grounds for their dismissal, under a Eurocentric literary gaze, as "reductive," devoid of enduring "universal" value.

Indeed, genuine attempts to grapple with Africa's "difference" may be confounded also by the tendency to see Africa always and only as Europe's complement, in so many repetitions of Leopold Senghor's infamous dictum, "Emotion is black; reason is European." In the worst of times, Reason is re-coded as Technology, Theory, Development, or Democracy, and we are reminded of Africa's inadequate and crumbling infrastructure, the woeful state of public health, government corruption, famine, coups d'état, multi-ethnic carnage. In the best of times, Africa's "distinction" may be perceived as a necessarily good and healthful supplement for deficiencies in Western or world culture, as in the early decades of this twentieth century when modernists were fascinated with their "primitive Other" and the supposed natural poetry of African art and life, that seemed to promise a wholesome, regenerative complement to an uneasy Europe.³ Even in the latter case, the question of Africa's distinctiveness, the unique gifts it may bear vis-à-vis Europe, has the potential to immobilize it in a space of alterity and marginality.

Perspectives such as these emanate from African literature's location in the Western academy, which is not unrelated to Africa's position in the world system. They express a particular mode of comparativism that limits our understanding of both the text characterised by its supposed alterity and the one perceived as the norm, since the latter's own "location" remains hidden. To read works under the banner of "diversity," is to give with one hand what one then takes back with the other. Roland Barthes, in another context,⁴ describes the process, as follows: in the first moment, "the difference between human morphologies is asserted, exoticism is insistently stressed, the infinite variations of the species, the diversity in skins, skulls and customs are made manifest"; in the second, an identical human nature or essence is conjured up: "from this pluralism, a type of unity is magically produced: man is born, works, laughs, and dies everywhere in the same way" (100).

Homi Bhabha carries this examination still further, when he writes that:

Cultural diversity is an epistemological object—culture as an object of empirical knowledge . . . the recognition of pre-given cultural contents and customs; held in a time-frame of relativism it gives rise to liberal notions of multiculturalism, cultural exchange or the culture of humanity. Cultural diversity is also the representation of a radical rhetoric of the separation of totalized cultures that live unsullied by the intertextuality of their historical locations, safe in the Utopianism of a mythic memory of a unique collective identity. (34)

Particularly important in Bhabha's remarks for this discussion is the idea of cultures as *objects* of knowledge—unitary, cloistered, and equal. These are the assumptions that lie behind questions of essence, authenticity and distinctiveness mentioned above, and they also

give rise perennially to the limp interpretation of African texts as portrayals of "cultural conflict." To read such texts within the framework of departments of English and French is, moreover, inherently to confront a certain Eurocentrism. Written in French, English, or Portuguese, African texts can be read as proof of the universal vocation of European languages, the silver lining on a dark historical cloud. Or, in a silent and subtle logic, they may be deemed to demonstrate the ultimate fruitfulness of colonial legacies, as Frantz Fanon suggests when he writes of black American culture, "the blues 'plaint of the Negro slaves' is offered to the admiration of the oppressors. . . . No oppression and no racism, no blues. The end of racism would sound the knell of the great Negro music" (126). The same premises lie in wait in this question, once put to me by a colleague, But aren't these texts at heart European forms with local color?

We have been considering the hazards of comparative study arising from African literature's location in an academy that assumes the universality of European civilization. My colleague's question, then, brings us to a corollary assumption that also disrupts the comparative study of literature: the assumption, on the one hand, that the West is characterized by cultures that are dynamic, capable of absorbing, processing, inventing, cultures to which writers and traditions from elsewhere merely add "spice." And, on the other, that Third World—in this instance African—cultural production will be derivative or imitative of Western models. It is in this sense that one may understand André Breton's surprise—in perhaps equal measure to his satisfaction—that Aimé Césaire's epic poem of negritude, *Return to My Native Land* (*Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, 1938) revealed not only an astonishing and marvelous command of French, but also an authoritative humanist vision, emanating from the margins (the "black race") and yet of "universal" appeal. Writing in 1943, as Europe is racked by war, Breton entitles his preface to the poem, "A Great Black Poet" and declares that:

the first new breath of life that can give us back our trust and vigour comes from a black poet. A black man it is who masters the French language as no white man can today. A black man it is who guides us today through unexplored lands building as he goes the contacts that will make us progress on sparks. A black man it is who embodies not simply the black race but all mankind, its queries and anxieties, its hopes and ecstasies and who will remain for me the symbol of dignity. (13-14)

We infer the role of European disillusionment in this paean to the black poet and, by extension, to black cultures. But Breton's repetition of "a black man" suggests a cognitive dissonance on his part or that of likely readers of the *Cahier*. It is that very dissonance that informed my colleague's question and that Fanon expresses as follows: "On one side there is a culture which is recognised as having qualities of dynamism, expansion, depth. A culture in movement, perpetually renewed. On the other side we find characteristics, curiosities, things, but never a structure" (125). Aimé Césaire's poem, like so many texts, explodes this myth of "curiosities, but never a structure," for it is not a servile replication of European high culture, although Césaire is steeped in European history and philosophy.⁵ The *Cahier* is, rather, an original conception ("the first new breath of life") produced from Césaire's specific location as a French colonial subject, that incorporates European cultural artifacts as building blocks: the dynamism is Césaire's.

It can be no surprise, then, that African texts, read under the assumptions Fanon names, can only be seen as paltry records or *documents* of culture, rather than as *statements*. Their capacity to interrogate and challenge, in brief, their cultural authority will be ignored, when they are precisely in fact, "the *enunciation* of culture . . . 'knowledgeable', authoritative" (Bhabha 34). The potential of African texts lies precisely in their cultural difference, their

articulation and contestation of meanings and values at what Bhabha calls the "significatory boundaries of cultural interaction."

What this means concretely, if we return to the issue signaled above, the anthropological and historical intertexts of many African fictions, is that under different terms of comparison, African literature's "difference" might suggest the varied origins and histories of the institution of literature, the imbrication of its functions with those of other discourses. It would favor a questioning of the supposedly radical opposition of the aesthetic and the political or, as Paul Gilroy writes, "modernity's insistence that the true, the good, and the beautiful had distinct origins and belong to different domains of knowledge" (39). It would necessitate a reconsideration of the relationship between monolingualism, national identity and literature.

It is my hope that the current volume will suggest new possibilities for the comparative study of African literatures for those in departments of English and French as well as those in departments of comparative literature, whose "location," in my view, should be neither this language, nor that nation or continent but the spaces in between. One of comparative literature's objects of study, broadly speaking, should be the very debates about how to contextualize, read, and compare "cultures" one knows and those one does not.

For the reader new to the field of African literatures and cultures, a few words of introduction may be helpful. As may be clear from the discussion above, those outside Africa have long been in the habit of casting the continent not only as singular (radically "other") but also as homogeneous. Nothing could be further from the truth, for Africa is a vast continent of varied topographies and climates, three times the size of the United States, composed of more than fifty nations, and by the most conservative estimates, more than 700 true languages.

Of all the modifiers with which one might characterize the literatures of Africa—ethnic, national, "emergent," "postcolonial," "African"—none is entirely satisfactory, indeed each is problematic. In Africa, the borders of contemporary nation states were drawn by and large by European powers with no regard for the movements of indigenous populations. Thus descendants of the Mande empire, which was consolidated in the thirteenth century by Soundjata, reside today in what are the states of Senegal, Mali, Guinea and Ivory Coast; the Pulaar-speaking Fulbe (also known as Peul or Fulani), who were traditionally semi-nomadic herders across the Sahel, still live across a swath of West African states from the shores of the Atlantic in Senegal to central Cameroon. The national identity of a writer, in the context of Africa, may offer little clue to the genealogy or specificity of a literary text, for the ethnic aesthetic tradition on which it draws may be far more significant than the writer's nationality. Likewise, an ethnic identity alone that reveals nothing of national experience and politics will also be inadequate. Thus, to know that the acclaimed playwright Femi Osofisan and novelist Ben Okri are both Yoruba and Nigerian citizens helps situate their work within mythological and aesthetic traditions as well as within a particular history of civil war, military dictatorship, ethnic and religious tensions. And, of course, African literature has, for better or worse, a truly global identity: Euro-language texts are published by and large in Paris, London or New York, are read by large publics outside national and continental boundaries, and are, for a host of reasons, inaccessible to most Africans. Many writers write under censorship or in exile—all these factors suggest the complexity of the literary act in Africa and the limits of ethnic and national identities in literary matters.

The term *African*, of course, also has limits. It obscures the great diversity of cultural and social realities across the continent but seems useful nonetheless in that it acknowledges the comparable histories, representations and policies that have left their mark on the array of peoples and cultures of this vast continent, that indeed have "invented" Africa, as Valentin Mudimbe argues. Moreover, it is a term that has wide currency among Africans themselves and expresses an identity based on political solidarity, if not cultural uniformity.

The contemporary literatures of Africa—and here the *s* is the sign of that often obscured plurality—are not “emergent,” as teleological paradigms that privilege writing, European languages, and perhaps the nation state as the fundamental correlatives of modern literary production might have it. The written texts that form our purview here range from transcriptions of oral performances in Bambara to written texts in European languages and in Pulaar. No matter their mode or language, it will become clear that all are situated within and engage contemporary life in complex ways. Rather than an entirely new development or a maturation from a pre-literary childhood, these literatures are better seen, in my view, as the product and means of the ongoing renewal of verbal artistic traditions that are age-old, even as they are produced and participate in a distinct historical moment.

That moment is often described, of course, as post-independence or neocolonialism. As is obvious, many contemporary African texts, along with those of Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean, are read as part of a vast movement of postcolonial writing, which, in tandem with poststructuralism and feminism, has been a powerful force in the Western academy's recognition of Literature's embeddedness in social and political practices and consequently in the interrogation of the very idea of “the West.” But the postcolonial label also levels the very different histories of African, Asian, and Latin American countries. It marginalizes indigenous language literatures that often do not “write back to the center” but follow other trajectories. It makes the sweeping assumption that colonialism is the defining factor in cultural production as in history. Finally, it obfuscates ongoing economic dependency and control by former colonial powers or international monetary institutions. A companion term, *Third World*, focusing on varied modes of production across these continents, also homogenizes, by implication, a “North” or First World within which lie specific communities as “underdeveloped” as those that are said to characterize the “South.”⁶ Such vexing issues of designation and periodization which also reveal African literature's “difference” thus have the potential to engage the assumptions of “Literature” and literary practice in the West.

The articles that follow, individually and taken as a whole, suggest the vibrant intellectual and imaginative life that characterizes African societies today, societies under siege by the social, political, and economic ills we know only too well. This volume is incomplete, of course, and offers but a window onto a continent. We begin, then, with an historical document from the “First International Conference of Negro Writers and Artists,” held in Paris in 1956, a decade after the Second World War and on the eve of formal independence (1957) of Ghana, the first African nation to achieve decolonization.⁷

Alioune Diop, founder of the Parisian publishing house and journal, *Présence Africaine*, pronounced the opening address of this meeting of “men of culture,” among them Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Léopold Senghor, Richard Wright, who had come to Paris and the Sorbonne to assess their culture's “wealth, crisis and promise.” Bound by common ancestry and the modern experience of racism in its various guises, they came from the far flung corners of the Americas and Africa: the United States, Haiti, Martinique, Nigeria, Madagascar, Mali, Benin (the former Dahomey).

This meeting marked a formal declaration of common concerns and consciousness despite varied histories and, not infrequently, conflicting perspectives. Diop, standing at this location forty years ago, makes arguments, typical of his generation, some of whose assumptions we may look upon today with scepticism or the advantages of hindsight. The most glaring lacuna is the absence of all reference to African women as citizens and producers of culture. Today the burgeoning literary production of women is transforming the gendered assumptions of these “first generation” African novelists and poets, writing during the waning days of colonialism and the first years of independence. The problem of European language and the postcolonial writer also can no longer be simply theorized as one of incompatible essences, a position with which Diop seems to flirt on at least one occasion of his address and which is arguably especially characteristic of the Francophone sphere. The faith Diop

expresses in the nation state as guarantor of freedom of expression and cultural memory likewise must be seen in the context of anti-colonial struggle. It informed much first generation writing and first generation writing in turn sustained it. In hindsight, as we consider Africa's countless violent totalitarian regimes, the manipulation of "ethnicity" in, for example, Mauretania, Rwanda, and South Africa, the exploitation of democratic forms and a rhetoric of democracy for masking and promoting the unequal distribution of power and resources, it is clear that such conviction has been tragically betrayed.

Yet, apart from the value of Diop's address as a statement of "the way we were" some forty years ago, much can be retained at the end of this twentieth century. With the greatest clarity and precision—even if his vision of "men of culture" is tinged by a certain romanticism—Diop names the role of culture, as Edward Said will do, in legitimizing political action and social hierarchy:

Colonisation would be reduced to a few simple incidents without aftermath, if culture had not come in to give its lasting support to the work and designs of the soldier, the colonist and the politician The values which culture has tried to create, the perspectives which it has tried to open up, and the moral and aesthetic laws which it has inspired, have had an influence on Western public opinion, on its conception of the universe, on its idea of mankind, and thus on its whole intellectual life. (9)

For Diop, not only does culture make politics possible, but politics determines culture. The latter formulation especially is vague and too encompassing, but it would be hard to argue with the specifics: European writers and intellectuals enabled colonialism by making its scandalous premises acceptable to the European public; colonisation not only sought to suppress indigenous cultural practices (religion, economies, languages) but also produced a class of fawning *assimilés*. Diop attacks the myth of radical African alterity ("this scandalous allegation of peoples without culture") and European centrality ("only the West can aspire to be regarded as having the right to be universal?") Refusing the false choice between a supposedly backward Africa and a purportedly modern Europe ("the trap between isolation and assimilation"), he signals the distinction, as we saw above, between what Bhabha comes to name "cultural diversity" and "cultural difference." The premises of the first paradigm will render indigenous culture static and disable it: "Our heritage cannot perform the service which it should if it is codified and mummified in the interests of the museums and the curiosity seekers of Europe"—Diop echoes Fanon in this reference to art as *curiosity*. He, likewise, names the challenge of reading under the sign of "cultural difference": "But how can the Negro world and its writers find voice, when we know that the slightest word, if it is at all deeply felt by its author, discloses an explosive power calculated to challenge not only the whole basis of the colonial system, but the very structure of the Western universe and of the world." He asserts thus, as will Bhabha in the 1980s, that "culture is a dialogue, which begins with our disagreements."

In brief, Diop calls for African writers' and cultures' continual renewal of traditions and self-articulation, supported by critical discourse and the curriculum. He sees Africa's place in the world, which is not one of complementarity to that of others, but simply one of integrity and openness. Africa *is* the world—no more, no less than any other continent. African "cultural experiences concern the world, just in the same way as [African peoples] are themselves concerned, for good or evil, with international events."

From Diop's address, then, we are thrust into the postcolonial, postmodern moment with Edna Aizenberg's "*The Famished Road*: Magical Realism and the Search for Social Equity." Aizenberg briefly traces the history and phases of magical realism and moves us away from the North-South debate to examine historical and cultural resonances between Latin America and Africa, what she calls the "innovative intertextuality of the margins." In

particular, she explores magical realism as mode of narrative, fashioning a discontinuous world of dream and neocolonial reality in Nigerian writer Ben Okri's Booker Award winning novel. The primary metaphor of *The Famished Road* is the liminal *abiku* child, who straddles the world of the spirits and that of the Living, forever caught "in-between" the marvelous world of the forest, which is continually shrinking, and the expanding urbanized modern space of new classes and political and economic realities.

Keith Cartwright's "Reading Roots—from Sunjata to Kunta Kinte and Milkman Dead" examines Mande cultural principles of *badenya* (mother-childness, the social tendency to conserve, to negotiate) and *fadenya* (father-childness, the tendency to disrupt, to innovate, to aggress) in the 13th century epic of Sunjata, the Mande emperor who united a vast region of West Africa. Cartwright traces the "migration" of images of the tree, of foods, of double-sightedness from West Africa to the United States, particularly the American South, and shows how American literature incorporates and adapts features of African traditions and therefore, in order to be well-read, must be read also through the lenses of African aesthetics. Cartwright sees literature in a vast matrix of cultural phenomena, rather than as a purely textual affair. He posits the South as a cradle of American culture and African aesthetics as a fundamental feature of American life. Cartwright's concludes with a reading of Alex Haley's *Roots* as mythmaking epic (rather than factual travel story and genealogy), thereby putting this much celebrated, much maligned work in perspective and revealing its particular genius.

From African literature's dialogue with the Americas, we return to African oral traditions and their ongoing reinventions in contemporary life. Stephen Belcher's "Of Birds and Millet: Problems in West African Mythology" argues that myth, "drawn from religious beliefs outside the realm of creative literature" is best viewed as "skeletal underpinning or epidermal adornment" in various genres. Belcher then examines Bambara oral historical narratives which, as Alioune Diop would have it, reinvent the classics. Contrasting one epic cycle to another, offering the kind of contextualization, historical and cultural references missing in typical presentations of collected African oral narratives of almost any genre, this study takes the semiotics of oral performance seriously and demonstrates the critical posture and authority of performers. Belcher's study makes clear that uniquely aesthetic considerations fail to do justice to such material.

Sonja Fagerberg Diallo's "Milk and Honey: Developing Written Literature in Pulaar" brings us to an African language literature and introduces many of the material factors which are typically left out of discussions of literary texts: literacy, audience, publishing, distribution, and class. Diallo is a founding member of ARED, a Pulaar publishing house in Senegal whose publications include, for example, manuals on water wells and women's reproductive health, a translation of the Senegalese constitution, and—last but not least, from the point of view of buyers—Pulaar novels.

Having set the context of this literary impulse on the part of new literates, writers and publishers, Diallo describes and contrasts a classic heroic narrative of the Fulbe and two recent novels, written in Cairo and France, that re-evaluate longstanding social values and conventions upheld in traditional narrative. The absence of explicit reference to outsiders, colonialism or neo-colonialism is striking. Yet this "turning inward," as Diallo puts it, as well as the literacy movement itself can be read as an affirmation of Fulbe identity in response to pressures not unlike those that inform the prototypical Euro-language texts, such as *L'Aventure ambiguë* (1960) by Pulaar speaker Cheikh Hamidou Kane. Fulbe men go away from home to work or study, traditional ways are strained, Pulaar is rivaled by French, Arabic, and, perhaps most importantly, Wolof, the majority language of Senegal.⁸

Were one to do a "sociology" of African literature, the questions which János Riesz raises in "Audible Gasps from the Audience" would certainly form the basis of a provocative chapter à la Foucault. Riesz explores the issue of plagiarism or dubious authorship as it

three French language writers, Bakary Diallo of Senegal (1926), Camara Laye of Guinea (1954), and Yambo Ouologuem of Mali (1968). He begins, quite appropriately, with "Literature" as a measure of African (or black) potential for intellectual and moral development—we are, of course, located in a Eurocentric "West," in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Plagiarism in the context of the arts is, as we know, a not so distant relative of imitation—the starting point for apprentices of all sorts, and presumably in all societies. In literature, a notable example is Renaissance poet DuBellay's nationalist and, not incidentally, ironic proposal that French writers write in French and "imitate" classical writers so as to create the institution of French literature. Moreover, allusions in jazz, intertexts in film and literature are legion and considered fundamental to the creative process for artists and audience. Yet under the Eurocentric assumptions outlined above, such gestures of appropriation are likely to be problematic for the reception and interpretation of African texts—original as they may be. Europe's "borrowing" of things African will be seen as dynamic; Africa's "borrowing" of things European, as a flaw. In the case of Ouologuem, for example, a reading that is not overdetermined by assumptions left in the wake of colonialism, has the potential, as Riesz points out, to force a re-examination of the very concepts of "imitation," "plagiarism," and "author."

These issues bring us to the heart of Biodun Jeyifo's "Ògúntóyínbó: Modernity and the 'Rediscovery' Phase of Postcolonial Literature." Wole Soyinka is known especially as a dramatist and poet, but Jeyifo examines Soyinka's early critical essays, written during the first years of independence, for they engage the question that continues to haunt African literature and that Jeyifo puts this way: "if modernity is that which putatively comes *entirely* from the 'outside,' what is the 'inside' in the face of the many refusals it must enact if its *difference*, its historic and cultural particularity must be protected—the refusal to merge completely into the seductive or coercive exteriority of the "outside," the refusal to interfuse with the "outside" as an inferior, subordinate and exploited term, the refusal to be a mere inversion, a mere Calibanic counter-discourse?" Jeyifo brings us back to the issues raised by Alioune Diop and more recently by Valentin Mudimbe, the very themes I have evoked above, themes that transverse these several articles.

Recalling Walter Benjamin's reflections on pre-capitalist narrative ("the lore of faraway places" and "local tales and traditions"), Jeyifo argues that the complementary possibilities of that "inside" and "outside" are no longer possible under capitalism and, most especially, colonialism. For Jeyifo, Soyinka's denunciation of the false paths and dead ends of an African literature in collusion with foreign critical condescension—primitivisms, essentialisms, an unspoiled African nature—is still pertinent because the "questions posed by the presumed exteriority, the presumed incommensurability of modernity to Africa will not go away but keep returning. . . ." For Jeyifo, Soyinka's critique is "one site of the discourses of a cultural modernity whose aspirations, and perhaps reach, are, and have always been, global."

Nana Wilson-Tagoe's "Post-Colonial Literary Theory and the Theorizing of African Literature" is also a meditation on the present and future of African literature. Wilson-Tagoe signals what are for her the blindspots of postcolonial theory: its insistence, for example, that the postcolonial text is defined primarily as a "dialogue with the imperial 'other'" and its dismissal of a "transcendent and wholesome" nationalism. For Wilson-Tagoe, African literature is engaged primarily with contemporary local realities, including an exploration of the relationship of the past to the present. New notions of identity, freedom and national consciousness are needed to inspire new theorizations of African literature. Privileging what Catherine Belsey calls the "interrogative text," whose aesthetic form is a dialogic representation of community that brings various points of view into "unresolved collision and contradiction," Wilson-Tagoe finds in Achebe's latest novel *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) and Nuruddin Farah's *Maps* (1986) texts that propose "the past" more as a point of illumination

than as the answer to be recovered. Moreover, they "expose the dangers of an unproblematised relation to the colonial nation state" but are "not necessarily a rejection of the possibilities of community."

We conclude, then, with Biodun Jeyifo's "Interview of Femi Osofisan." Playwright, performer and critic, Osofisan is one of Nigeria's most popular and important creative artists, and he has performed both outside and inside Africa. Jeyifo interviewed Osofisan in the context of the Black Arts Festival of Atlanta (USA) 1995, during which Osofisan had staged *Tegonni*, "an African Antigone." It seems fitting to give the final word to a practitioner, in the thick of intertextualities ("Without plagiarism, there would be no original creators"), material constraints ("because of increasing production costs, you will notice producers are sponsoring mostly plays with small casts"), and contemporary events ("we are a people in urgent need of re-inventing, rather than 're-discovering' ourselves").

Osofisan discusses his choice of setting, late nineteenth-century Nigeria, and his theatrical modifications of Sophocles's play in order to introduce issues arising from his and his audience's "locations." Thus in addition to questions of individual and collective freedom, Osofisan raises issues of despotism and foreign intervention, identity ("who is black?" "who is white?"), African collusion with British colonizers. He calls moreover for more complex interpretations of interracial relationships. Of the African "mistresses" of colonial agents, for instance, he argues: "far from being traitors to their communities," they "used their relationships as weapons for the demystification of the colonial propaganda of omnipotence." Osofisan embodies the authority of the modern artist on the worldstage: "the urge I feel for adaptation comes from ideological disagreement, when I am provoked to contest some point of view a playwright—usually one I admire—puts forward." This indeed brings us back to Alioune Diop's and Homi Bhabha's "dialogue of differences," comparative literature at its best.

Before concluding, I want to thank a number of individuals without whom this volume of the *Yearbook* would not have been realized: Gil Chaitin, for his interest in and support of an issue devoted to African literature; Charlie Sugnet and Mamadou Diouf, for their critical response to this essay; Mary Vogl and Howard Pollack for assistance with French and German translations respectively; Mimi Gaye, Iba Thiam, Natasha Vaubel and Cim Kearns, for technical assistance of all sorts.

It is my hope for those readers located in a "West" whose reach extends deep into Africa, readers whose act of reading African texts typically constitutes the discursive "outside," that this volume will indeed open a window onto a continent.

Dakar, Senegal

Notes

¹ See, for example, *De la littérature des nègres* (Paris: Chez Maradan, 1808), in which Henri Grégoire offers a comparative analysis of European, African, and new world cultures. He argues, on the basis of African accomplishments in crafts and performances, that Africans and their descendants had the capacity—if not enslaved or mistreated, and given the advantages of "civilization"—to write "literature."

² The University of Wisconsin—Madison has the only Department of African Languages and Literatures in the U.S. African literatures are taught in other units, of course, such as History, Folklore, African Studies, African-American Studies.

³ For a detailed treatment of African primitivism in French language pre-Surrealists, Guillaume Apollinaire, Blaise Cendrars, and Tristan Tzara, see Jean-Claude Blachère, *Le modèle nègre* (Dakar: Nouvelles Editions Africaines, 1981); in plastic arts, Jean Laude, *La peinture française (1905- 1914) et l'art nègre (contribution à l'étude des sources du fauvisme et du cubisme)*, (2 vols. Paris: Klincksieck, 1968). For a more recent expression of African/Euro-pean complementarity, see Paul Zumthor, *Introduction à la poésie orale* (Paris: Seuil, 1983. 282-284).

⁴ I am referring to Barthes's critique of the photographic exhibit, "The Family of Man."

⁵ See James Arnold, *Modernism and Negritude: The Poetry and Poetics of Aimé Césaire*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1981.

⁶ There are a number of critiques of postcolonial theory. See the debate between Frederic Jameson, "Third World Literature in the Era of Multi-National Capitalism," *Social Text* 15 (1986): 65-88; and Ahmad Aijaz, "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness," *Social Text* 17 (1987) 3-27. See also Anne McClintock, "The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term 'Postcolonialism,'" *Social Text* 10.2-3 (1992). Karin Barber examines the marginalization of African language literatures in an unpublished paper, "African-language literature and post-colonial criticism."

⁷ Ethiopia alone was never colonized.

⁸ See Fiona McLaughlin, "Haalpulaar Identity as a Response to Wolofization," *African Languages and Cultures* 8.2 (1995), forthcoming.

Works Cited

- Achebe, Chinua. *Hopes and Impediments*. New York: Doubleday, 1989.
 Barthes, Roland. "The Great Family of Man." *Mythologies*. Trans. Annette Lavers. New York: Hill and Wang, 1972.
 Bhabha, Homi. "The Commitment to Theory." *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994. 19-39.
 Breton, André. "A Great Negro Poet." *Return to My Native Land*. Trans. Emile Snyder. Paris: Présence Africaine, 1968.
 Césaire, Aimé. *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*. Paris: Présence Africaine, 1983.
 Diop, Alioune. "Opening Address." *Présence Africaine* Nos. 8-9-10 (1956): 9-18.
 Fanon, Frantz. "Racism and Culture." *Présence Africaine* Nos. 8-9-10 (1956): 122-131.
 Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993.
 Mudimbe, Valentin. *The Invention of Africa*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1992.